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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20503

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

REAGAN-GORBACHEV MEETINGS IN GENEVA  
November, 1985

Third Plenary Meeting

DATE: November 20, 1985  
TIME: 11:30 A.M. - 12:40 P.M.  
PLACE: Soviet Mission,  
Geneva, Switzerland

PARTICIPANTS:

United States

President Ronald Reagan  
George Shultz, Secretary of State  
Donald T. Regan, Chief of Staff, White House  
Robert C. McFarlane, Assistant to the President for National  
Security Affairs  
Arthur Hartman, Ambassador to the USSR  
Rozanne Ridgway, Assistant Secretary of State for European and  
Canadian Affairs  
Paul H. Nitze, Special Advisor to the President and Secretary of  
State on Arms Control Matters  
Jack F. Matlock, Jr., Special Assistant to the President for  
National Security Affairs  
Mark Parris, Director, Office of Soviet Union Affairs, Department  
of State  
Dimitri Zarechnak, Interpreter

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev  
Eduard Shevardnadze, Minister of Foreign Affairs  
Georgy M. Korniyenko, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs  
Anatoly F. Dobrynin, Ambassador to the United States  
Aleksandr Yakovlev, Chief, Propaganda Department, Central  
Committee, CPSU  
Leonid M. Zamyatin, Chief, International Information Department,  
Central Committee, CPSU  
Andrey M. Aleksandrov-Agentov, Assistant to General Secretary  
Gorbachev  
Sergey P. Tarasenko, Assistant to Minister of Foreign Affairs  
Yury D. Uspensky, Interpreter

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After the press had been ushered out of the meeting room, Gorbachev invited President Reagan to lead off.

The President noted that he wished to address a number of items which there had not been time for the previous day. He would open with a few words on the Geneva arms control negotiations.

The President observed that our peoples were particularly concerned by nuclear missiles, which, if the button were pushed, could kill millions in a matter of minutes. It was important to show our people that we were concerned.

We had therefore shaped our proposal on strategic offensive systems so as to achieve deep reductions, focusing in particular on what we think are destabilizing weapons. Our proposals dealt with a number of delivery systems: ICBMs, SLBMs, etc. It built upon the fifty percent reduction concept contained in the Soviet counterproposal. It also incorporated reductions to 4,500 ballistic missile warheads and a limit on ALCMs of 1,500; the overall sum would be the 6,000 figure that the Soviets had proposed.

The U.S. had to insist, however, that the reductions be applied to the proper categories of systems. We could not agree to the Soviet's proposed definition of "strategic delivery systems" or any definition that included within a common limit a category of delivery systems on the US side while excluding it on the Soviet side. The two sides, of course, had a long negotiating history on this issue, so the President would not repeat the U.S. rationale, but rather restate its insistence on the definition agreed upon in past strategic offensive arms agreements as to the categories of systems to be included in limits on strategic offensive arms.

The aggregate result of the reductions and limits we proposed for strategic offensive arms would be a more stable world in which the number of these arms would be radically reduced to comparable levels on both sides, the threat to the retaliatory capabilities of each side would be significantly diminished, and the prospects of verification would be enhanced. The President stressed that verification was vital if we were to reduce suspicion between our two governments.

In the area of intermediate-range nuclear arms, the U.S. proposal built, in part, on Soviet ideas. The U.S. was prepared to cap US LRINF missiles in Europe at the level deployed as of December 31, 1985, in return for your agreement to reduce your LRINF missile launchers within range of NATO Europe to the same launcher number. The U.S. would be prepared to discuss with the USSR the exact mix of these systems. The U.S. proposal included

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reductions in the number of SS-20 launchers located in Asia and outside range of NATO Europe. The end result, the President stressed in conclusion, would be that both sides would be limited to an equal global LRINF missile warhead number.

Before moving onto other issues, the President offered Gorbachev a chance to respond.

Gorbachev indicated that he did, in fact, have a few comments. The Soviets had carefully assessed the U.S. NST proposal. They welcomed the U.S. agreement to accept 50 percent reductions in nuclear strategic arsenals. It was of fundamental importance to note any basis for moving ahead in the search for mutually acceptable proposals which could be components of possible agreements.

But Gorbachev also had some critical observations to make regarding practically all the elements of the Soviet proposal. He did not wish to dramatize this. He believed that this approach coincided with the President's own in welcoming the basic thrust of Soviet proposals for radical reductions, while not welcoming other elements. Both sides now had proposals on the table. There was plenty to work with.

Reiterating that he did not want to dramatize differences in the two sides' approach, Gorbachev stressed that the Soviet Union truly desired a serious search for mutually acceptable proposals. He stressed that the Soviet Union was not proposing elements which would be unacceptable to the U.S., which could jeopardize U.S. security, since this would make it impossible to reach agreements in the future. But the Soviets expected the same treatment from the United States. If the U.S. advanced proposals which sought to undermine Soviet security, it would make agreement impossible and complicate future work in this area.

There were elements in the U.S. proposal, however, which clearly departed from the January 1985 U.S.-Soviet understanding on the goals and subjects of the Geneva talks. On the one hand, the President and his colleagues asserted that the U.S. had not departed from this understanding, that the U.S. was in favor of radical reductions in defensive nuclear weapons and in favor of preventing an arms race in space.

The President's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was regarded by the U.S. as consistent with the January understanding. This was a "revelation" to the Soviets. No matter under what flag the U.S. chose to cover it, SDI amounted to placing weapons in space, to spreading the arms race to space. This view devalued the remaining elements of the U.S. proposals. What purpose could be served by radical reductions if the U.S. contemplated deploying weapons in space -- with all the attendant consequences.

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When the Soviets had proposed that the two sides agree to close the door to deployments of weapons in space, it was consistent with both the U.S. and USSR's security interests. Gorbachev noted that the U.S. had claimed the Soviet Union was ahead in scientific research on space questions; if so, the U.S. should want to stop the process now. As the U.S. did not, Soviet superiority in space research did not appear to be the problem.

Gorbachev felt he had to say that he did not know what lay at the bottom of the U.S. position. How the U.S. had come to its position was not important to him, however. What was important to him was the position itself. Gorbachev was concerned that the position was fed by an illusion that the U.S. was ahead in the technology and information transfer systems on which space systems would be based, and that a possibility therefore existed to obtain military superiority over the USSR. The U.S. might even consider it possible to obtain a first-strike capability, or, under certain circumstances, to launch a first strike. The Soviet Union needed to consider worst cases in developing its policies.

Gorbachev told the President that he had recently observed to a Soviet scientist that he could see no reason why the President should be committed to SDI. Gorbachev had wondered why the President could have any interest in injecting a new element of instability into the relationship, in further exacerbating U.S.-Soviet relations. The scientist had said that she had done research into the matter and found the explanation: SDI would produce from 600 billion to a trillion dollars in new military expenditures. That was the reason.

With mounting urgency, Gorbachev said he must return again to the problem of SDI, even at the risk of injecting some tension into the discussion. He did not want to do this. But he could not ignore the importance of the problem. Gorbachev expressed regret that the U.S. appeared determined to depart from the January agreement on stopping the arms race on earth and preventing it in space. If the U.S. departed from that road, Gorbachev did not know when it would be possible for the two countries to meet on it again. Everything at the Geneva NST talks would come to a halt. For its part, the Soviet Union remained committed to the goals of the January understanding, and was prepared to do everything possible to achieve them.

The President stated that the scientist Gorbachev had referred to was dealing with a fantasy. She reminded the President of the scientists who had told President Eisenhower that ICBMs would never work.

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The President underscored that SDI was not a weapons system or a plan for conducting a war in space. It was an effort to find a more civilized means of deterring war than reliance on thousands of nuclear missiles which, if used, would kill millions on both sides. Never before in history had the possibility existed of a war which would bring about the end of civilization.

Even if the two sides reduced offensive arms by 50 percent, there would still be too many weapons. The U.S. did not see in SDI a means of obtaining military advantage over the Soviet Union. The benefits of SDI research would be for the USSR as well as the U.S. If defensive systems could be found, they would be available to all. This would end the nuclear nightmare for the U.S. people, the Soviet people, all people. The Soviet Union and the United States had the capability to move beyond simply aiming weapons at each other with the risk of ending the world as we know it. As to the argument that the U.S. sought to build an offensive arsenal, the U.S. objective was that whoever developed a feasible defensive system would share it, so that any threat to the other side would be eliminated. If there was opposition to that concept, the President speculated it might be based on the assumption that nuclear weapons might, at some point, be used. The U.S., on the other hand, was seeking a security system based on "shield," not "spears" or missiles. Under the current system of deterrence, it would be impossible to tell the winner from the loser in the event of war.

Gorbachev replied that he understood the President's arguments but found them unconvincing. They contained many emotional elements, elements which were part of one man's dream. Gorbachev did not wish to suggest that the President did not want peace. But the fact was that SDI would result in the appearance of weapons in space. They might be built as anti-missile weapons, but they would have the capability of striking earth. The USSR could never know for sure. The Soviets had agreed on 50 percent reductions in nuclear weapons. But the President was advocating a whole new class of weapons. Describing these weapons as a shield was only packaging. They would open a new arms race in space. The President would be held responsible.

Gorbachev said that there were dreams of peace and there were realities. He did not believe the President saw him as a blood-thirsty person who wanted to drag his country into conflict. The Soviet Union was for reducing the number of weapons. History would remember the President, as well as the Soviet leader, for having begun to eliminate nuclear weapons. But agreement had not yet been reached. And now SDI threatened to open a new arms race.

The President observed that, under the U.S. open laboratories concept, scientists from both sides could satisfy themselves that

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SDI research was not being directed toward the development of an offensive capability. Gorbachev shot back his agreement that laboratories should be opened, but only if the development of space weapons had first been banned. The President reiterated that Soviet scientists would be able to verify by visiting U.S. laboratories whether the U.S. was building destructive weapons or a shield. The U.S. was after a shield.

This got to the point that it was necessary for the two countries to get beyond suspicions. The President asked whether he would not be justified in suspecting that, under certain circumstances, the Soviets would use their missiles against the U.S. Words could not reduce the idea of a threat from one side to another. The Soviet interpretation was that SDI would lead to the development of new offensive weapons. The U.S. was trying simply to see if there was a way to end the world's nightmare about nuclear weapons. The President emphasized that the U.S. would share its research with the Soviet Union; attempts to develop destructive weapons would be discovered.

Gorbachev asked the President with some emotion why he would not believe him when he said the Soviet Union would never attack. Before the President could respond, Gorbachev repeated the question. He again interrupted the President's answer to insist on a response.

The President stated that no individual could say to the U.S. people that they should rely on his personal faith rather than on sound defense. Gorbachev questioned the sincerity of the President's willingness to share SDI research, pointing out that the U.S. did not share its most advanced technology even with its allies.

Gorbachev called for a more realistic discussion. The Soviet Union was prepared to compromise. But the U.S. had the impression that the USSR was weak and could be painted into a corner. That was no illusion. There would soon be a disillusionment; perhaps not in the President's time, but ultimately. The President would be held responsible. SDI would open a new sphere for the arms race. Why was this necessary?

The Soviet Union had said it would agree to a separate INF agreement, to deep cuts. These had not been easy decisions. The Soviets had their concerns. But they felt that if steps were not taken in the next year to 18 months, the consequences would be grave. The President wanted to catch the "Firebird" of SDI by using the U.S. technical advantage. There would be disillusionment, but it would come too late, as the "infernal" train would already be moving.

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Gorbachev observed that perhaps his remarks had grown a bit heated. He had meant only to convey to the President the depth of Soviet concern on this issue.

The President replied that, with all due respect, Gorbachev's concerns were based on a false premise. Overcoming several interruptions from Gorbachev, the President reaffirmed that the U.S. would be prepared to reduce nuclear weapons to zero and ultimately to eliminate them. The fact was, however, that they still existed. A defensive shield was therefore necessary. He compared nuclear weapons to chemical weapons. Conventions had been negotiated to ban the use of chemical weapons, but gas masks had been retained. With a defensive shield against nuclear weapons, people would have an additional guarantee against their use. The President could not see how SDI research could be interpreted as threatening to human life or targets on earth. Moreover, he repeated, the ultimate idea was to share SDI research; neither nation would be able to use it to develop a first-strike capability.

Gorbachev alleged that the U.S., under the guise of a shield, intended to introduce weapons into space. The Soviet Union must base its policies on this fact. The Soviets could not be sure what the U.S. ultimately had in mind. The fact was that to destroy weapons other weapons were necessary. The President countered that no one was sure whether SDI would work; the U.S. effort was designed only to find out if a defense was possible. Gorbachev said that this meant only that the U.S. was seeking to determine if space weapons were possible.

The President explained that his instructions to those responsible for SDI research had been to find out if there were a means to stop nuclear missiles. He had said that if such a means existed, the U.S. would share it with other countries so as to make nuclear weapons unnecessary. He was aware that SDI research dealt with systems such as lasers and particle beam devices which had weapons applications. These systems, however, were designed not to kill people, but to stop nuclear missiles from reaching their target. The President noted that the Soviet Union already had the world's most developed ABM system.

Gorbachev said he felt it inappropriate in their conversation to inject banalities more in keeping with press conferences. The Soviet ABM system was in compliance with the ABM Treaty. The Soviet Union had chosen to place its system around its capital; the U.S. had placed its near missile fields. The USSR was scrupulous in complying with treaties dealing with nuclear weapons. It was too dangerous to engage in deceptions in this area. The President agreed, noting that the U.S. had raised the question of Krasnoyarsk radar and its possible battle management role. He asked Gorbachev whether the U.S. expression of

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willingness to share its SDI research did not adequately deal with Soviet suspicions.

Gorbachev indicated that the President already had the Soviet assessment of the U.S. position. Gorbachev wanted to emphasize it because it was the key question of their meeting. It would define the future political dialogue between the two countries, the nature of the Geneva negotiations, the outcome of important decisions on domestic policy in both countries. It appeared that the President was very committed to the development, testing, and deployment of space weapons. The Soviets would have to consider and base their policy on this fact. The Soviets had heard similar views expressed by many of the President's advisers. But these were only advisers. The President had the ultimate responsibility. Gorbachev sometimes had felt that the President's advisers feared the President's prestige would suffer if he gave up SDI. Gorbachev was "500 percent" convinced that the President would in fact benefit from such a decision.

The President expressed concern that the discussion had gone too far and suggested a more reasonable approach. The two sides had agreed to a reduction in strategic offensive weapons of 50 percent. It was unfortunate that this was being frustrated because the Soviets objected to an attempt to determine if there was a defense against nuclear missiles. It would be years before this was known. We had made clear our willingness to share SDI research. There was no reason why such research should prevent us from going ahead with reductions in nuclear forces.

The President did not know whether or not Gorbachev believed in reincarnation. Perhaps the President in a previous life had been the inventor of the shield. In any case, the President believed that trust and prospects for peace would improve if both sides began to rely more on defense, with offensive weapons being reduced.

Gorbachev asked rhetorically what was the result of the Geneva talks thus far. There had been negotiations, with the objectives and subjects clearly determined: to stop the arms race on earth and prevent its spread to space. The Soviets had felt that the work done thus far in Geneva would enable the two leaders to give an impulse to the process in their own meeting. The leaders had now met and it seemed clear that the President felt that weapons could be introduced into space. Gorbachev feared the negotiations would go by the wayside in this case. What, he asked, was to be done.

The President replied that, where Gorbachev saw a threat, we saw an opportunity. We should both seek to reduce offensive arms by 50 percent and to determine if defense was possible. We could then sit down and decide if deployment was desirable. We would

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share our findings. Was that not a fair deal? The Soviet Union would be aware of our arms program. We would look at the Soviets's. We were talking about several years. Would people not, the President asked, be more confident that a defense would work if both sides reduced by 50 percent.

Gorbachev asked that the President not treat the Soviets as "simple people." The President replied that he did not see how he had in any way shown disrespect or charged the Soviets with naivety. He had explored the various issues with Gorbachev as openly as possible. He could see no logical argument against going ahead with research when we have made clear that we will not have a monopoly on defense if a feasible solution is found.

Gorbachev questioned why it was necessary to conduct research when nuclear weapons were being reduced -- and by 50 percent as a first step. SDI was torpedoing the possibility of steps to reduce nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union wanted to lock the door against space weapons -- to bar it or even drive in nails -- and then begin reductions. The Soviets did not know what weapons might be developed by researchers. If the past was any guide, they would find things they had not expected to find. The Soviets had repeatedly shown in recent months their willingness to seek reasonable solutions. The U.S. approach could only lead to an expansion of the arms race on earth and in space.

The President denied this. He stressed that the U.S. was prepared to open its laboratories to demonstrate that it was not seeking a new offensive potential. Gorbachev interrupted to state that the Soviets were looking for a way out. They were serious. The President countered that the way out was to reduce and not to miss the opportunity to develop a defense because of fear that it might have an offensive potential.

Gorbachev asked if the President had money to spare. The President replied no. Gorbachev said he knew that. The President had in the past expressed the view that SDI could be used to prevent "some madman" from using a nuclear weapon. The U.S. and USSR should reduce their own weapons by 50 percent and then have other countries join them. More could be done with the NPT Treaty. Ways could be found to prevent madmen. Because of one madman, should we have an arms race in space?

The President again wondered why the Soviets should object to research. At this point, we were only talking about a theory. We were also talking about safeguards. If the problem appeared to be solvable, then we could talk. But both sides would for the moment retain nuclear weapons. Reductions would make it possible to save considerable expenditures, e.g., for modernization.

Gorbachev expressed his regret that the two leaders would have so little positive to say on the Geneva talks. The President replied that the U.S. would have to tell people that the possibility of reducing nuclear arms by 50 percent had been destroyed by suspicion of ulterior motives. Gorbachev noted that strategic defense was the President's idea; it was hard to dispute the notion that the Geneva negotiations were based on the January understanding, which deal with two elements: stopping the arms race on earth and preventing it in space. After his discussion with the President, it was clear that the U.S. was determined to develop and introduce weapons into space.

The President said that the U.S. side would tell a different story. We would say that current effort to develop a system that would not kill people, but only stop missiles, was the cause of Soviet suspicions which had prevented reductions of nuclear weapons. An opportunity was thus being lost. The President felt that public opinion would find that difficult to understand.

Gorbachev said that this was the U.S. assessment. But it was important the leaders deal in substance not propaganda. The Soviet side had expected that, when the two leaders met, after months of preparation, it would be possible to reach solutions and to clarify what had been agreed to in January.

Noting that they had already run over the allotted time, the President urged Gorbachev to consider further the safeguards the President had mentioned. It would reassure publics in both countries if the leaders could agree on this and go forward with reductions in nuclear weapons. The President had no further elaborations other than to repeat his inability to comprehend how, in a world full of nuclear weapons, it was so horrifying to seek to develop a defense against this awful threat, how an effort to reduce nuclear weapons could break down because of such an attempt.

Gorbachev for his part, questioned how, in such a difficult situation and with the threat that the arms race would expand in the absence of restraints, one could contemplate a new arms race in space. It was not even possible to reduce armaments on earth. What could be done when weapons were orbiting the globe? How could one verify this? Gorbachev could not commit himself to developing such systems.

The President said it was necessary to give each side the freedom to look at what the other was doing. He recalled President Eisenhower's "Open Skies" proposal in expressing disappointment at the Soviet Government's one-sided approach to verification.

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Gorbachev suggested that the two sides think about and analyze the thorough discussion which had taken place. It might be possible to return to the subject that afternoon. He reiterated that he saw no obstacles to movement towards a solution which might serve both sides' interests. The President urged Gorbachev to consider the verification ideas he had shared. Gorbachev indicated his willingness to do so, but stressed that what was being verified was important. The Soviets would be prepared to verify an end to nuclear testing; they would not be willing to verify a continuation of such tests. They would be similarly willing to verify a prohibition of space-strike weapons, but not a process by which such weapons would be developed, whether through open laboratories or other means. But in principle, they were open on the question.

The President again urged Gorbachev to consider whether he could not accept the idea of a shield.

Gorbachev did not respond, proposing that the meeting end and resume at 2:30 PM.

Prepared by:  
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